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## Begin's Decision to Attack Reactor

The decision not only to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor but to publicize the raid was made by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin against the advice of most of his ministers.

They urged a surreptitious attack that couldn't be traced to Israel but might be blamed on Iran. "No, this is going to be my Entebbe," declared Begin, referring to the dramatic commando raid that rescued Israeli hostages from terrorists at Uganda's Entebbe airport.

The story behind Begin's raid on the Iraqi reactor has now been pieced together by intelligence sources, who have access to his inner circle. Here is their startling account:

Exactly a year ago, Begin held a "philosophical discussion" with his military and intelligence chiefs about eliminating the Iraqi reactor. The majority opposed a frontal attack on the installation but did not rule out a clandestine operation.

Begin was shown an aerial photograph of the nuclear site and was asked to authorize a more thorough, secret, infrared survey of the area. With a flourish that has become vintage Begin, he signed the photograph: "With the salutations of Zion. Menachem Begin."

Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agen-

cy agreed with the Israeli assessment that Iraqi's dictatorial President Saddam Hussein planned to develop nuclear weapons.

Inside the Israeli Ministers Defense Committee, Begin encountered opposition to an open attack. Here are some of the arguments raised by the Israeli intelligence services:

- An Israeli attack upon an Arab reactor would set a dangerous precedent for future Arab reprisals against Israel's nuclear works.

- Such a raid would focus world attention on Israel's own nuclear capability and could produce "unbearable pressure" upon Israel to accept a nuclear balance of power in the Middle East.

- Knocking out the reactor would not prevent the Iraqis from building a bomb. With their unlimited petrodollars, they could purchase or steal the materials needed.

- The destruction of the reactor would not eliminate the fissionable materials, which would still be available to build simple nuclear weapons.

- It would be better to leave the reactor intact so it could be watched by Israeli intelligence. Otherwise, the Arabs might build nuclear weapons in small, hidden installations.

- If the Iraqi reactor were left alone, the Israelis could disrupt it by "unorthodox methods."

- An Israeli attack on Iraq would tend to unite the Arabs.

These arguments were rejected, however, by Begin, who took personal control of the operation.

Begin wanted to demolish the reactor before the Iraqis activated it. Once it became "hot," a bomb attack would rain down radioactive debris upon Baghdad.

A prediction that it would become "hot" in July determined the early timing of the attack. Then the Israeli intelligence services brought in evidence that the reactor couldn't possibly be activated before September or October. Begin, nevertheless, held to his early timetable.

On the morning of the raid, the intelligence services submitted new evidence that the reactor couldn't become "hot" for many months. But Begin still would not consider a postponement.

It had been agreed to withhold news of the attack until the Arabs started to scream about it. Privately, the White House was informed three hours after the attack. But President Reagan's strategists suspected that the Israelis hoped Washington would leak the news and thus give the impression of U.S. collusion.

Both the Iraqis and Americans remained silent. Not until 2 p.m. the following day did a Jordanian broadcast put out the first hint. Then Begin decided to wait no longer and ordered the news released.